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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an interdisciplinary approach to environmental education for students in grades 6 through 9. This approach emphasizes the importance of students' understanding of nature through hands-on experience in out-door settings and the verbal or artistic expression of their experiences. The first principle of effective environmental education is an integrated curriculum and the active involvement of students, parents and community members. For maximum benefit, the overall direction and planning of the environmental education experience should be in the hands of the teachers most familiar to the students. The second principle is that environmental education should take place in intact groups (same classroom or team groups in school). Such groups are conducive for improving social skills and realizing the full benefits of curriclum integration. Students should be housed with students and staff they already know well, only moving out occasionally for carefully planned experiences with students from other groups. In addition, individual and group times set aside for "processing" one's experience is an essential component. The third principle consists of preparing for and expecting peak life experiences as a result of insight gained by the student. Allowing students to express their emotions is an important aspect of the environmental education experience, which is lacking in a normal classroom environment. (LP)

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OUT WITH THE CURRICULUM!
WIDENING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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No, don't throw out the curriculum, but take it out. Take it out of the classroom, out of the school, and into the world of nature. And be sure to take your entire curriculum, not just science. Too often the term "outdoor education" means taking students into the woods for a few days, where they learn to identify some trees and study the rudiments of ecology. Or it may be viewed as merely an exploratory of extra-curricular activity, nice to have but not really essential.

There is a fine line of sensitivity between "outdoor education" as commonly understood and the complete "environmental education experience" that we are advocating. Our experiences with a total, interdisciplinary approach to environmental education span many years and include middle level students from grades six through nine in Tennessee, Kentucky, New York, and Ohio. Here are some of the things we have learned.

The future of mankind on this planet--indeed the future of all life in this part of the universe--requires that all our young people both understand and act on what is now known about the balance of nature. Steve Van Matre (1979), Bob Samples (1981), and Carl Sagan are but a few of the eloquent spokesperson for this "planetary conscience." There is no shortage of books, curriculum guides, and special programs like Project Wild or Sunship Earth that help students learn essential concepts and principles from the many disciplines that comprise environmental studies. To learn these well, it is essential that students spend some time in the out-of-doors gaining perspective and personal experience through hands-on activities.

Hands-on experience means actually digging into the soil to see and feel the differences in texture between subsoil and that thin, vital, infinitely-precious layer we call topsoil. It means tasting a dewdrop, hugging a tree, immersing yourself in a swamp to gain the world perspective of a frog, or

sitting silently alone at night to listen for the sounds of life in a woods, field, desert, or beach.

Experiences must be both multi-sensory and multidisciplinary. The meaning of an experience is revealed fully only when it is translated into some form of verbal or artistic expression. Talking over one's experiences with a peer, writing in a journal, translating feelings into poetry, art, or music are essential elements of environmental education. And since the solutions to environmental crises all involve human action, the key dimension is interpersonal relations--social studies write large.

The First Principle: Total Involvement

The first principle of effective environmental education, then, is that effective environmental education involves all subjects, all staff, all students, all parents, and selected community members not directly involved in the educational program. Dr. R. Tally DeWitt (1952), pioneer in outdoor education at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, stressed that every educational experience should be "milked dry" of potential learning. Eighth graders under his direction helped to plan their entire week at camp, applying their knowledge of nutrition in planning meals, using mathematical skills in purchasing food and calculating costs of equipment rentals, and gaining real-life language experience through writing thank-you letters to experts who came to camp to conduct an astronomy night or to lead the group on a cave exploration. Environmental education can be a prime example of integrated curriculum.

Teachers in self-contained classrooms are in the best position to take advantage of the multidisciplinary potential of environmental education, since they teach nearly all the subjects in the curriculum. Block-time and core teachers, who are responsible for two or three subjects, can relate knowledge from several fields, but then they must coordinate their plans with staff members who teach the rest of the curriculum. Likewise, academic interdisciplinary teams can make environmental studies one of their interdisciplinary units, but for best results they must reach out to include teachers of the exploratory areas, such as art, music, home economics, industrial technology, and physical education. Paraprofessionals also should be involved. Custodians and cafeteria workers can be of great

help in the logistics of moving a group of students into an outdoor environment for several days.

Parents, as part of the learning/teaching team, also should be in on the planning from the very beginning, so they can support the project and help students make the necessary home preparations. This includes both seeing that students have proper dress and equipment, and also that they are psychologically prepared. For some students, the week of school camping may be their first extended time away from home, with homesickness a very real possibility.

Selection of adults to accompany a class is crucial. They should be sought out and chosen for their willingness to trust young people, to listen, to provide sensitive yet firm leadership. They should have a variety of specific skills appropriate to the objectives of the planned experience. Carefully chosen parents, community persons, teachers, and other school staff are essential to realize the full potential of an environmental education experience.

Parents, community members, and other non-professionals can serve as cabin supervisors, staff the first aid station, assist on hikes or field trips, or provide instruction in some appropriate topic. In view of the young adolescent's striving for independence, however, any parents who go along should not have children in the current year's class.

Student involvement can take place at several levels. If the outdoor experience is new to the school community, or if a new site is being considered, a student committee should visit the site to help the staff consider its possibilities. For example, a ninth-grade environmental education program in Kentucky was first presented to a small group of students, who in turn "sold" it to the parents and then to the students.

In a small middle school in Ohio, initial planning for the year's outdoor experience was carried out by the student council, consisting of representatives from sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Since they spent a week in camp every year, each year's experience was to have a different emphasis--ecology, pioneer life, outdoor recreation, aesthetics of nature, for example--all within the overall theme of understanding and appreciating nature. The student council advisor took the students'

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preliminary ideas to the faculty for their approval and refinement. With the year's overall focus set, teacher-student planning began in earnest in each classroom.

For maximum benefit, the overall direction of the environmental education experience must be in the hands of the teachers closest to the students, be they homeroom teachers, core teachers, or a team. If several classes are going at the same time, added help with logistics may come from a school administrator or district environmental education coordinator. Sometimes a teacher may be given some released time to negotiate with camp staff, arrange transportation, place food orders, handle money matters, and the like.

Second Principle: Environmental Education Should Take Place In Intact Groups

Teaching is a personal encounter, and spending several 24-hour days in a resident outdoor setting is probably the most intense personal encounter a teacher and students will ever have. Middle level students are preoccupied with peer relations, and the resident environmental education experience is unsurpassed as a laboratory for working out human relations. Therefore, teachers and their students should move into the campsite as intact groups; that is, in the same classroom or team groups that they were in at school. This is essential to build on the rapport already developed in the school environment. Herding several hundred young people into a strange environmental, mixing them in cabins and study groups with a lot of people they do not know, and putting them through unfamiliar routines far from home is hardly the way to establish the psychological climate necessary for deeply meaningful experiences. By the time students become reasonably comfortable and ready for learning, it is time to go home!

Choose an outdoor site that has housing in small groups or clusters, rather than large dormitories. It should be possible for thirty students and their homeroom teacher to have their own separate living area, even though they may join others for some meals and total camp activities. A core teacher taking both morning and afternoon classes might need a cluster of cabins housing approximately sixty students and their adult leadership. Interdisciplinary teams would need larger clusters accommodating up to 120 students, depending on the size of the team. In any case, students should be

housed with students and staff that they already know well, moving out from these units occasionally for carefully-planned experiences with students from other groups.

Effort should be made to enable every student to go to camp, with scholarship money available for those who cannot afford the cost of room and board for the week. Care must be exercised in explaining the program to parents, who too often confuse this educational experience with the typical summer camp where recreation is the major emphasis. Some teachers may need encouragement, too, with assurances that they will not be required to rappel down a cliff or subsist on natural foods for three days. The emphasis in resident environmental education is on learning, not ruggedness or survival, although there should be some opportunities for challenging experiences fitted to the experience and maturity of both teachers and students.

Taking intact groups also is essential to realize the full benefits of curriculum integration. The outdoor experience should be a natural part of the year's curriculum, with lead-up experiences in the classroom and follow-up experiences afterwards. Neither teacher nor students can really comprehend the life-changing experiences that take place in successful environmental education programs unless they have "been there." Moreover, many of these experiences have to do with interpersonal relations.

Teachers who have established a healthy psychological climate in the classroom before going to camp not only have fewer discipline problems in camp, but they also find that students adapt much more quickly to the new environment and unfamiliar routines. Brushing teeth beside your teacher in the washroom or joining him or her in a volleyball game are guaranteed to help students see teachers as genuine human beings. This deepening of relationships carries over into the classroom afterwards--indeed, on into life.

But enhanced interpersonal relations do not just happen--they must be planned for like any other aspect of the curriculum. Regular times for reflection, journal writing, and discussion must be integral parts of the day in camp. Quiet time and alone time are just as important as group activities, although students may resist them at first. Rap sessions in work groups or cabin groups will take place anyway. But at least part of the time they need to be guided by staff members especially tuned in to the needs, problems,

and concerns of transescents and also familiar with the goals of the environmental education experience. Individual and group times set aside for "processing" one's experiences are a natural extension of the homeroom guidance or advisor-advisee programs so essential in the middle grades. In a resident outdoor education setting, they may achieve unexpected depth of meaning for students.

Third Principle: Prepare For and Expect Peak Experiences

Taking intact groups into an outdoor environment for a multidisciplinary educational experience may bring about yet another reward--a peak experience. Mystical insights into the marvels of the universe like those of Annie Dillard (1975) are within the reach of all of us under the right circumstances. Every human being can gain some flash of insight, some emotional breakthrough that literally is life-changing. A sensitive staff will both plan for and watch for these opportunities, never knowing when and for whom the experience will reach this intensity.

For one student, it may be the awe he or she feels on a hilltop contemplating in silence a meteor shower. Another may be moved during a campfire by the words of a fellow student, readings from essays by Aldo Leopold (1970) or Loren Eiseley (1953), or by poems by Emily Dickinson (Brinnin, 1960) or Robert Frost (Untermeyer, 1943). The marvelous world revealed through a microscope may profoundly touch another student, while another may respond with deep emotion to a song written and set to music by a classmate.

Staff members may not become aware of these peak experience unless the student chooses to share them through discussion or personal writing. At these times, adults must resist the temptation to jump in, preach, or tell students how they ought to feel. Better just to listen, appreciate, support, and perhaps, if the situation seems appropriate, share one of your own peak experiences.

Often these peak experiences involve interpersonal relations among the students. One ninth grader became furious at another student for putting down the singing of one of the girls at the campfire. When he was unable to find the offender, he smashed his fist into the cabin wall. Suddenly, he realized that what he was really truly to "kill" was his own

habit of doing the same thing--negatively criticizing others so he could feel superior, instead of honestly praising another's accomplishments. He burst into tears and sought out the boy he had intended to beat up, embraced him, and shared his newfound insight.

Sometimes staff members can set-up potential peak experiences in advance. For example, one eighth grader at a Tennessee camp was subjected to continuous ribbing by his peers because of his high, squeaky voice. A staff member privately coached the boy all week on how to change the pitch of his voice. At the week's final gathering, he called out to the boy, "How are you today, Mike?" In a deep bass voice the boy replied, "Feeling mighty low!" The group never forgot that experience, and never did Mike!

Potential peak experiences also should be built into the total environmental education experience. Adult leaders sensitive to these possibilities are aware of the subtle differences between a marshmallow roast and a council fire, a pick-up basketball game and a no-winners cooperative game, a romp in the night woods and a quiet walk listening for sounds of nature.

Adults sometimes are frightened by young people's emotionality, especially when it comes unexpectedly or sweeps through a group. When one group of ninth grade boys and girls suddenly began working out relationships with tears and hugs, some adult leaders wanted to organize a hike to "take their minds off" the intense situation. Fortunately, the lead teacher realized the importance of trusting the youth with time and noninterference. The result was life changes for everyone in camp, which would not have happened if the students' own processing had been short-circuited. Teachers too often find it hard to let students deal with their feelings, seeking to control through the world of words and thoughts.

Emotions are often very near the surface with transescents, but in the classroom they are usually kept hidden. Tears, shouts for joy, or even a sudden hush falling over a normally-talkative group of teenagers may indicate that something in the experience has touched them deeply. Valuing and sharing the emotional highs and lows of life can take place in a group of people, young and old, who have learned to love and trust one another. Carefully planned environmental education experiences provide such opportunities.

Conclusion

Taking students out of the classroom, out of the school, and into the world of nature is hard work. There are countless details to plan, lots of glitches to work out, people to persuade and official paperwork to complete. Yet no other learning experience provided by the school can quite equal the multifaceted learnings that can take place through such a program. For maximum benefit, it must involve all aspects of the curriculum and all people who have any stake in the project. Adults and students should move into the outdoor environmental together in intact groups, and they should plan for, expect, and celebrate life-changing peak experiences.

And herein lies the key to the survival of life on this planet: human beings who dare to love and trust one another and the marvelous universe that made all of us possible.

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